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The Florida Times-Union

July 25, 2008

Few tap healthy behavior program

By **KEVIN TURNER**,
The Times-Union

Although a program dedicated to rewarding Medicaid recipients for healthy behavior is a good idea, not many are taking the state up on it, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund said in a study released Thursday.

The report from fund-commissioned researchers from Georgetown University's Health Policy Institute on the Enhanced Benefits Rewards Program was its sixth in a series examining a five-year Medicaid reform pilot in Duval and Broward counties. The pilot also is under way in Baker, Clay and Nassau counties.

Researchers found that Enhanced Benefits Rewards Program administration costs are high, many Medicaid recipients and doctors don't know about it after nearly two years, and few Medicaid recipients have cashed in on their rewards for healthy behavior.

"I think the program has a laudable goal, but that's a really tough outcome to achieve. There's a question whether this approach will actually work to change people's behavior," Georgetown University Health Policy Institute Researcher Joan Alker said.

Medicaid beneficiaries in pilot program counties are eligible for up to \$125 in credits per year. Amounts given range from \$7.50 for complying with a medication regimen to \$25 for a pap smear or a child doctor's visit for a regular checkup. Nearly 60 percent of the credits given have been for keeping appointments with primary care physicians; 20 percent for preventive care and 12 percent for prescription compliance. No credits have been given for available exercise, quit smoking or weight loss programs, the study found.

Credits can be redeemed for health-related items at participating pharmacies, but they can't be cashed out.

Although recipients have earned \$12.5 million in credits, they've used only 10 percent, the study concluded.

The recipients who didn't know about it weren't alone. The study found that 75 percent of doctors contacted also were unaware of it.

Alan Harmon is a doctor of gastroenterology and hepatology at St. Vincent's Medical Center and Memorial Hospital Jacksonville, where he treats Medicaid patients. He said Thursday he didn't know about the reward program, but agrees with the idea.

"That makes great sense," he said. "Any time you do prevention it pays off."

The Medicaid reform pilot, which runs until 2011 unless the Legislature renews it, privatizes benefit administration to several private health care companies, all of which are required to offer core benefits.

State Rep. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina Beach, who serves as the Healthcare Council Chair for the Florida House of Representatives, said Thursday that Medicaid reform is the product of years of work and that the pilot is ironing out the rough spots.

It's considered a national model pilot and other states are watching it, he said.

"In terms of getting costs under control, Medicaid reform is an overwhelming success," he said Thursday. "We were able to increase benefits without increasing cost."

Some of those benefits come from competition between private providers in offering incentives to Medicaid recipients, he said. He said that proves Medicaid belongs in the hands of the private sector, not government.

But previous Georgetown studies have not embraced reform, saying it has reduced the doctors who accept Medicaid - separating patients from doctors - and has thrown up obstacles between recipients and needed treatment and medicines.

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